

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

# MUSICAL TABLES



POEMS

BILLY COLLINS

"Billy Collins puts the 'fun' back in 'profundity.'" —ALICE FULTON

# Praise for Billy Collins and *Musical Tables*

“In [Billy] Collins’s new book of very short poems, called *Musical Tables*, one named ‘Oxymorons’ lists ‘beach culture,’ ‘happy birthday,’ and ‘family fun.’ It’s that dry humor which has helped make him a best-selling poet—another oxymoron.”

—*The New Yorker*

“What makes Collins ‘the most popular poet in America,’ as he has been dubbed by *The New York Times*, is his signature mix of dry humor, perceptive observations, and accessibility, punctuated by constant surprises. In *Musical Tables*, Collins presents 125 short poems [with] just enough text to convey a mystery, question, or discovery. The brevity of the poems will remind some readers of their earliest encounters with poetry, when surprising visuals and

phrasing made the genre seem almost magical.”

—*Christian Science Monitor*

“Collins has said that the short poem is a sort of test for a poet: just as an artist should be able to draw a simple chicken, the poet should be able to channel meaning, emotion, profundity, and humor all through a couple of lines. Perhaps Collins is also aware of society’s rapidly diminishing attention span, but he has created an undaunting, readable book of poetry that will appeal to all ages and hit you where it hurts.”

—*LitHub*

“Collins’s short poems warm the soul. Like koans and haiku, these micro-lyrics roam a range of tone and feeling, from elegies to epiphanies to bone-dry witticisms.... His formal compression is deft; his insights, arresting.”

—*Oprah Daily*

“Billy Collins, a former poet laureate of the United States, is a

real gem. He's a poet whose writing manages to be accessible, poignant and funny at the same time."

—*The Palm Beach Post*

"Tiny, tempting little poems."

—*The Community Library*

# Musical Tables

*Poems*

BILLY COLLINS



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“...the face of the dog when she’s  
chewing a carrot.”

—NICK LAIRD



## *Musical Tables*

No one knew what to do  
when the music stopped,  
plus, the big tables were always in  
the way.

But soon it became the new game  
in spite of its pointlessness,  
or was that the reason for its  
popular appeal?

One

## *Highway*

Hitchhiking alone,  
I notice an ant  
walking in the opposite direction.

*Aa*

At school,  
always seen together,  
capital and small,  
parent and child

holding hands,  
about to cross  
the street  
in Alphabet City.

## *The Naked Eye*

There was no eye lid  
to cover the naked eye

so she covered herself  
with some scenery,

a meadow she liked to look at  
when the other eye wasn't  
looking.

## *Argument from Design*

Six petals on each iris,  
every other one  
with a small yellow streak,

which resembles a tiny vase,  
holding a few flowers of its own.

## *New Calendar*

The poem of next year—  
every week a line,  
every month a stanza,

and a tiny sun  
rising and setting  
in every numbered square.

## *The Mohawk Diner, 3 AM*

Has that revolving cake stand  
always been there

or did some men install it

while you and I sat here  
at the counter not saying  
anything?



## *Dog*

When she runs in her sleep,  
eyelids twitching,  
legs churning sideways on the  
floor,

I wonder if she's chasing  
a squirrel or being chased  
by an angry farmer waving a  
rake.

## *An Exaltation of Frogs*

I know it's supposed to be larks,  
but their full-throated croaking  
early this rainy morning  
after a night of more rain  
is lifting me slightly off the floor.

*Look*

The morning lake  
was smooth as a mirror.

A few angels were even seen  
flying down

just after dawn  
to check themselves out.

## *Limits*

Even on a calm day  
if you remain quiet  
and hold your breath,

you still will not  
be able to hear  
the singing of the clouds.

## *Last to Leave the Party*

In your white dress  
you revolved around me  
like the moon

and like the earth  
I was spinning,  
tilted back on my own axis.

## *The Dead of Winter*

We will all die  
in one month or another.

Many of the above  
left us in December

while others will stay on  
to see in the new year.

## *Carbon Dating*

He tried it once  
as a last resort

but most of the women  
were a million years old.

## *From a Railing*

A long barge  
with a helpful  
tugboat alongside

pushing parts  
of the East River away  
on their way somewhere.



## *Flaubert*

As he looked for the right word,  
several wrong words  
appeared in his window.

## *Mute Potato*

Before introducing it to a pot  
of boiling water,

I caught a medium-size  
Idaho potato

staring up at me  
with several of its many eyes.

## *Headstones*

If the dates show  
the husband died  
shortly after the wife—

first Gladys then Harry,  
Betty followed by Tom—

the cause is often  
gradual starvation  
and not a broken heart.

## *Creative Writing*

When I told a student  
not to use single quotation marks  
around lines of dialogue,

he told me that all our words  
are already inside the quotation  
marks  
that God placed around Creation.

## *The Code of the West*

Say what you want  
about me,  
but leave the horse  
I rode in on out of it.

## *Breaking Up*

Like the nomadic dollar  
I pass to the cashier

behind the register  
you are off to other hands.

# *The Sociologist*

I wandered lonely as a crowd.

## *Pupil*

A hole in the eye,  
the black well in the middle  
of a flower, an iris,

or she who gives you the eye  
sidelong on her way  
out of the classroom, after the  
others.



# *Reflections on an Amish Childhood*

I was a little square  
in a round hat.

## *Night Sky*

Lying on the beach  
after so much wine and talk—  
dippers everywhere.

## *Used Book*

I turn a page  
someone dog-eared,

like the bent ear  
of a dog who's still lost.

## *Thelonious Morning*

The breeze was slight  
and moved only three

of the six wind chimes,  
which formed a minor chord.

# *Seashore*

A banded  
Piping Plover

puts its best foot forward  
then the other.

## *Random*

Tossing a dart  
at an open encyclopedia,  
I happen to hit a flying squirrel.

Their kind, the entry explains,  
as I close in,  
are seldom seen

due to their nocturnal habits  
and high dwelling places.  
So much there to admire!

## *Teenager*

Even a branch on an evergreen  
may take an unexpected turn  
up, down, or sideways

and grow substantial  
in some weird direction.

## *Twisting Time*

I am twisting again  
but not like I did last summer  
or the summer before  
or the summer before that.

I am twisting more slowly now  
because it is cold  
and I have grown heavy  
and there is hardly any wind.



## *D Major*

A favorite  
key signature  
of pals

featuring,  
as it does,  
two sharps.

# *Simplicity*

*Dalmatian*  
is hard  
to pronounce,

so the children,  
pointing, say  
*fire truck dog.*

*Henry Wadsworth  
Longfellow*

Trouble  
was not  
his middle name.

# *Eyes*

O little twin spheres  
echoing  
the shape of the earth

and a perfect match  
for the blue  
curvature of the sky,

no wonder  
the dark, descending birds  
always begin with you.

## *Falling Asleep*

Walking backwards  
into a dark forest,

I sweep my footprints  
out of existence

with a large  
weightless branch.

## *A Memory*

It came back to me  
not in the way  
a thing might be returned  
to its rightful owner

but like dance music  
traveling in the dark  
from one end  
of a lake to the other.

## *Poetry*

As if it were not hard enough,  
whenever my pencil

moves along the page,  
the pink eraser end points up,

a little finger wagging,  
reminding me of our  
appointment.

# Two



## *Motel Parking Lot*

Saying goodbye is so sad,  
I don't even bother

to turn around to see  
what it was you just threw at me.

## *View*

In the summer sky  
a cloud with its mouth open  
eats a smaller cloud.

## *Flash*

As my train  
sped by a schoolyard,  
I caught a tall boy  
missing a basket.

## *The Visit*

The wind blew  
open the front door

and sat down  
in my father's chair.

# *The Sunday Times*

There's so much  
going on in the world  
besides these sausages.

## *The First Straw*

The camel felt nothing  
as it stood outside the tent,  
its nose lifted in the thin desert  
air.

## *Koan in the Rain*

You want to know  
the sound of one hand clapping?

It is the same  
as the sound of the other hand

holding the umbrella,  
only slightly louder.

## *Crèche*

For a moment,  
the ox and a sheep  
looked over at each other,

then they turned away  
and went back  
to adoring the Child.



## *ENG 243: The History of Egotism*

You will notice, class,  
that Wordsworth did not write

“Edward, the butcher’s son,  
wandered lonely as a cloud.”

## *Hotel Room*

Unlike  
the breakfast menu,

I had no desire  
to be hung

outside  
before 2 am.

# *New York Directions*

It's down  
in the Village  
between  
Bleek  
and Bleekest.

## *A Small Hotel*

When a match touched  
the edge of the page,  
my poem filled with smoke,

then a few words  
were seen to stumble out  
in nothing but their nightgowns

with no idea which way to run.

## *Angelus*

Church bells  
from across the water—  
a breeze blows  
the letter I was reading  
into the lake.

## *Physical*

The nurse quipped  
my pulse was so slow  
she could take it with a sundial.

In a garden,  
she watches the shadow move  
while I sit there, ticking away.

## *4'33" by John Cage*

As I listened,  
the scales  
fell from my eyes.

## *Olden Plea*

Could we skip the hanging  
and the quartering  
and just do some drawings—  
maybe of a pillory, an urchin, or a  
herring?



## *Three for a Quarter*

Just as you can tell the age of a  
tree  
by the rings within it,

you can tell the vintage  
of a country song

by the coin required  
to play a tune on the jukebox.

*Yamaha*

I gun my baby grand  
along blacktop roads,

and I play *Clair de Lune*  
in my helmet and boots.

## *Quatrain*

When a woman  
in a low-cut blouse  
walked by,

the grocer in the doorway  
raised his eyebrows  
revealing the four lines in his  
forehead.

## *Dogma*

I might be an atheist  
were it not  
for all the tall angels  
and the pudgy cherubs  
in the silvery clouds  
presiding over all those miracles.

## *November Morning*

My appearance at the shore  
has surprised this pair of wood  
ducks—  
the wild-haired male, the smooth-  
headed hen.

They've left the cover of reeds  
to begin their day together,  
and I have an afternoon flight to  
Milwaukee.

## *Google Maps*

My parents' grave  
is 1198 miles north of here.

17 hours and 23 minutes  
from now,  
I'll make believe I'm there.

# *Oxymorons*

Family Fun

Beach Culture

Office Party

Dog Person

Children's Hospital

Light Pollution

Happy Birthday

## *Art Revolutionaries*

Pollock, yes,  
but let's not forget  
whoever it was  
that painted the first  
still life without fruit.



## *Medium and Message*

If John Keats  
had ever held in his hand  
a photograph of Marilyn Monroe,  
his mind would have been blown  
twice, at once.

## *The Milky Way*

A mother's face  
hidden in the night sky,  
stars clustered at her breasts.

In the morning  
I pour her over cereal  
with a scattering of berries.

## *Envelope*

When a stamp was affixed  
to the northeast corner,

all went dark  
in the great state of Maine.

## *Jazz Man*

I've taken some lessons  
and worked on  
some nice voicings for the chords

but all I have to do  
is raise the keyboard cover one  
inch  
and the cat dashes from the room.

## *Child Astronomy*

After many hours  
of peering  
into a telescope

Goldilocks  
discovers a dipper  
that is just right.

# *Children*

There's a new movie out  
titled *Children*.

I don't know  
what it's about

but I like the voice  
on the radio

when it says:  
“*Children*: now playing  
everywhere.”

# Three

## *Breakfast*

In the hotel restaurant,  
orange koi in a pond.  
I toss in some corn flakes.



## *Divorce*

No more heavy ball,  
just the sound

of the dragged chain  
with every other step.

## *Face Up*

The jack of diamonds  
lying supine  
on the table,

a prince sleeping  
in a pasture—  
fifty-one cows.

## *Octopus Sonneteer*

He wrote the octave  
all at once

then dashed off the final six  
while uncorking a bottle of  
champagne.

## *Dictionary Wanderings*

The two silent “els”  
in talk and calf

found a place  
of prominence in llama.

## *Junior Philosopher*

*I'll have this figured out in no time,*  
he announced,  
as he faced the Cosmic Void.  
He was wearing  
a clean white shirt  
and holding  
the tool kit of reason  
by its handy leather strap.

## *Zen Backfire*

The only time  
I cut myself shaving

is when I'm aware  
that I'm shaving.

## *Tom Thumb's Thumb*

was so small  
it failed to get the attention  
of passing cars and trucks.

And what was he doing  
out there anyway,  
hitchhiking all by himself?

## *Neighborhood*

What do I care  
that they're tearing down  
the nice old houses  
and putting up brutal ones?

Before very long,  
I'll be just a breeze  
blowing around town,  
trying to avoid all the wind  
chimes.



## *Wet Morning*

The big red bougainvillea  
is drooping,  
an effect of last night's  
wind and rain.

Thunder too,  
but plants don't have ears,  
or is that  
what the petals are for?

*Covid*

Another long day  
at home.

I set my phone  
on Airplane Mode.

## *Empty House*

After the old man died  
but before the house was torn  
down,

the windows continued to enjoy  
a view of the meadow and the  
woods beyond.

## *View from a Bridge*

I never thought  
of myself  
as a little universe  
inside a big one  
until just now.

## *Spacing*

When the traffic  
in Los Angeles thickens  
and comes to a stop,  
the drivers in the other cars

look like they are pretending  
to be from earth,  
and not from some other planet  
where this kind of thing never  
occurs.

## *Poetry Collection*

They mutter  
in the alleys of the city,

the old ones  
who were not selected.

# *Orphans*

Earth and moon  
pulled through space,  
a boy and his pale sister  
forever spinning in a darkened  
room.

## *Departure*

I wonder—  
did you happen  
to play something new  
on the piano

just before you left

or was it the breeze  
from the door  
you left open  
that turned the page?



## *Deep Mexican Night*

You can hear them playing jai-alai  
from this flowering terrace,

the distant rebounding ball,  
and the fans with their strange  
cheer:

“Jai-alai-aiiahh-jaih-  
jaaihaahaha!”

## *Charmed*

The tiny figures  
on your bracelet  
ride around one wrist

while on the other  
the hours  
circle your pulse.

## *Celtic Interlacing*

Early horizontal designs  
for the rollercoasters of the  
future.

## *Corridor*

I've grown old—  
now my own name  
rings a bell.

## *Deer Hit*

The morning after  
the tawny blur  
in the windshield,

a sunny breeze  
is stirring the woods  
as I regard the damage—

a crumpled fender,  
and one headlight  
with an eyelash of fur.

## *Awake*

Dead quiet night—  
I lie in bed

waiting for  
the other pin to drop.

## *Page-Turner*

Desirable  
in fiction.

Not so much  
with a slim book of poems.

# *Pianissimo*

At first,  
I thought it meant  
a really big piano.



## *Card Sharp*

He said  
he was born,  
raised,  
and re-raised  
somewhere in Nevada.

## *Carpe Diem*

As the coffee was brewing,  
I learned from a book  
that the trunks of elephants  
are sensitive enough  
to pick up a coin  
and powerful enough to smash  
a tiger to the ground,  
and that was more than  
enough seizing the day for me.

## *Italian Palindrome*

A man.

A plan.

A canal.

Canaletto!

## *Avoidance*

When I saw him  
walking toward me in the city,  
I stopped and looked in the  
window  
of a store that had closed.

Turned out, it was only  
someone who looked like him,  
but all the way home, I wondered  
where in the world he could  
possibly be.

## *Nurse*

The one who spoke by a window  
in a stairwell,  
resting her head on her arm,  
said she was so many stumbles  
beyond tired,  
she caught herself  
envying the dead  
for looking like sleepers in their  
beds.

# Four

## *Refrigerator Light*

The minute  
she slams the door

I stop  
thinking about her.

## *Summer*

The two of us  
one night in lawn chairs,  
music coming from somewhere.

You explained  
what we were hearing  
was the B-side of the moon.



## *Morning Walk*

The dog stops often  
to sniff the poems of others  
before reciting her own.

*3:00 AM*

Only my hand  
is asleep,  
but it's a start.

## *Poems*

Because words  
move from left to right,

the three fish  
in the print on the wall,

who are facing the other way,  
appear to be swimming upstream.

## *Saying*

Two birds,  
wings flapping  
in a puddle of fresh rainwater.

Why kill them,  
I wondered,  
with one or even many stones?

# *Angler*

Alone  
with my thoughts

I spent the day  
in the stream  
of consciousness.

## *Corn Field*

Far from any lake,  
I walk in over my head.

## *A Rake's Progress*

An autumn afternoon,  
the neighbor's boy at work,  
  
a pile of red and yellow  
leaves growing ever higher.

## *Sunday Morning*

Opening a book of poems  
about flowers,

the cat amuses herself  
while she waits for me to wake  
up.



## *The Student*

She made asterisks  
next to passages she liked,

little stars that kept shining  
after she closed the book.

## *The English Professor*

When I asked him  
if he was in love,

he accused me  
of anthropomorphizing him.

*Fay*

never amounted  
to a hurricane,

just a lot of rain  
with a girl's name.

## *Young Webster*

After he spied her  
in a garden  
holding a rose parasol,

he defined *love* as  
“something of  
or pertaining to me.”

## *Birthday Poem*

Remember that birthday poem  
I wrote for you?  
It just stopped being about you.

## *After the Concert*

It's so quiet now—  
standing in the kitchen,  
I can hear myself think.

## *Light-Year*

Being the amount of light  
that falls every year  
on this green pasture

where I pulled the car over  
to write down  
what I just thought of.

## *Cornish*

Would someone  
please translate  
her long memoir

into a language  
almost no one speaks  
or understands anymore?



## *Symphony No. 4 (Brahms)*

The kettle drummer  
fell asleep

while the triangle player  
counted out his rests.

## *Reclining on Clouds*

I would pray for you  
but the gods would know  
I was talking  
to myself  
and would turn  
their curly  
golden heads  
the other way.

## *The Exception*

Whoever said  
there's a poem  
lurking in the darkness  
of every pencil  
was not thinking of this one.

## *Quickie Ekphrasis*

I looked at a postcard  
of Mount Rushmore  
while I cooled my tea with a  
spoon

then I turned over  
the postcard of Mount Rushmore  
and bit into a buttered scone.

## *Medieval Photography*

Nothing came out very well.  
People thought sitting still was  
odd.  
Black and white had yet to be  
conceived,  
even though many days were  
grey  
with low clouds and  
unpredictable rain.  
You remembered someone by  
closing your eyes.

## *Bad Hotel*

I told the woman  
from housekeeping,  
who was eager to do my room,

to just come in  
and pretend I'm not here,

which is exactly  
what I had been doing  
ever since I checked in.

## *Siren*

So enchanting was her singing,  
I turned the boat around

and tied her to my mast  
so as to enjoy her melodies  
as I sailed around this fascinating  
world.

## *Halloween*

When I said hello  
to a very small cowboy,  
he gave me the trigger finger.



## *Disappointing Freak Show*

A bearded man,  
a one-headed chicken,  
a sailor with a tattoo,  
and a three-legged piano.

# *Coincidence*

Along Came Betty  
and  
In Walked Bud.

## *Lazy Creator*

And on the second day  
he rested.

## *Weekday*

Pure sunlight  
on the miniature orange tree  
and the white columns of the  
porch.

How extraordinary it would be  
some morning on earth  
to be dipped into creation.

Plus...

## *Card Table*

After father says  
game time is over,  
it goes under the stairs,  
its four legs folded up  
like a giraffe saying its prayers.

## *Transitive Death*

It's the bucket  
that you kick when you kick,  
but what is it  
that you pass when you pass?

## *Music*

I carried a tune  
all the way to your doorstep  
where it waited  
for you to get home from work.



## *Narcissism*

I want you to live  
every moment  
as if it were my last.

## *Early Tattoo*

In blue ink  
I drew  
what was meant  
to look like a tank  
on my 5th grade arm  
where a bicep  
was meant to be.

## *Small Audience*

Before movable type,  
a poem would be written by hand.  
Someone would read it alone  
then hide it under her pillow.

## *Precocious*

When I repeated  
“There, there...”  
my sobbing daughter  
accused me  
of quoting Gertrude Stein.

## *Simile*

A poem about music  
is like a branch about a bird.

## *The Children's Table*

The peas  
and dinner rolls  
were flying in all directions  
and one little boy  
was up to his wrist  
in the mashed potatoes.

## *Supine*

A large airliner  
passed overhead  
flapping its silver wings.

## *As Time Goes By*

Like the dog who forgot  
where he buried a bone,  
the old farmer forgot  
where he buried the dog.



# Afterword

When did my fascination with small poems begin? Maybe with nursery rhymes, but surely by high school when I was introduced to haiku. Later, I started finding them in the work of some of my favorite living poets, like Gary Snyder, Ron Padgett, Kay Ryan, and recently Charles Simic. I loved the suddenness of small poems. They seemed to arrive and depart at the same time, disappearing in a wink.

These days, whenever I pick up a new book of poems, I flip through the pages looking for small ones. Just as I might trust an abstract painter more if I knew he or she could draw a credible chicken, I have faith in poets who can go short.

Small poems are drastic examples of poetry's way of

squeezing large content into tight spaces. Unlike haiku, the small poem has no rules except to be small. Its length, or lack of it, is its only formal requirement.

The small poem is a flash, a gesture, a gambit without the game that follows. There's no room for landscape here, or easeful reflection, but there is the opportunity for humor and poignancy. And this minimalist practice has its masters. Here's A. R. Ammons:

*Their Sex Life*

One failure on  
Top of another.

And a forlorn one-liner by W. S. Merwin:

*Elegy*

Who would I show it to

Compared to the ocean liner of Milton's *Lycidas*, Merwin's single line is a canoe, but there it remains, untippable, floating on the lake of a page.

At some point, I began to think of the small poem as its own distinct form, and I started making my own little contributions to the genre.

for Steven and Eliza  
for setting the stage again and  
again

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Also by Billy Collins

*Sailing Alone Around the Room*

*Nine Horses*

*The Trouble with Poetry*

*Ballistics*

*Horoscopes for the Dead*

*Aimless Love*

*The Rain in Portugal*

*Whale Day*

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*Bright Wings*

*Poetry 180*

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BILLY COLLINS is a former Poet Laureate of the United States. He is the author of twelve collections of poetry, including the bestsellers *Aimless Love*, *The Trouble with Poetry*, and *Sailing Alone Around the Room*. He is also the editor of *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry*, *180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Every Day*, and *Bright Wings: An Illustrated Anthology of Poems About Birds*. A former Distinguished Professor at Lehman College of the City University of New York, Collins served as New York State Poet from 2004 to 2006. In 2016 he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He

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